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RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1757
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 9963
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1046
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3618
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0612
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1829
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3322
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0862
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0656
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000664

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: JOURNALIST IMPRISONED PENDING CORRUPTION CHARGES

REF: CARACAS 536

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

1. (C) Talk show host Gustavo Azocar was arrested March 6 in connection with a corruption investigation against him for allegedly defrauding the Tachira state lottery in 2000. A Tachira state court March 7 sustained the prosecution's argument that Azocar posed a flight risk because of his supposed failure to appear at court dates, and ordered him held until the investigation against him was complete. The defense called the ruling political retaliation against Azocar for his outspoken criticism of state governor Ronald Blanco La Cruz. Media sources told emboffs that the fraud charges against Azocar may prove true, but the timing of Azocar's arrest directly following his March 5 criticism of a judge involved on a highly-charged political case made it likely that Azocar's arrest was a political retaliation. The BRV's attacks on the press have risen dramatically as of late (reftel), and the media and Azocar's lawyers have portrayed his arrest as yet another BRV attack on press freedom. While the case has been transmitted to the national stage, garnering mention by Reporters without Borders and the National Press Workers Union, among others, the case against Azocar seems to be more the product of Tachira's notoriously cut-throat state politics than the BRV's broader initiative to muzzle the press. End summary.

Journalist Imprisoned -- Faces Fraud Charges

2. (C) Journalist Gustavo Azocar was arrested March 6 upon his departure from Tachira Regional Television. Azocar is the host of the popular morning talk show "Coffee with Azocar" and a leading critic of the state's chavista governor, Ronald Blanco la Cruz. He is under investigation for embezzlement for allegedly accepting payment from Tachira State Lottery for ads which were never run when he was the director of a

Tachira radio station in 2000. The investigation has been ongoing for at least six months. The prosecution justified Azocar's March 6 arrest by claiming Azocar had failed to attend court dates and cooperate with the investigation, and was therefore a flight risk. A Tachira state court March 7 upheld the prosecution's motion that Azocar be held until the investigation was complete. Under Venezuelan law, the prosecution now has 30 days to either formally charge Azocar or release him and drop the investigation.

13. (C) The defense dismissed the court's ruling against Azocar, claiming that they had presented official documents certifying Azocar's attendance at the last 10 court dates, and calling the case against him "a show" whose real purpose was to keep him off the air. (Note: Tachira is traditionally seen as a notoriously corrupt state, and Tachira media sources told emboffs March 8 they would not be surprised if there was some truth to the charges against Azocar, although they had seen no concrete proof.)

"I am the governor's prisoner"

14. (C) Azocar told the press March 7 his arrest was the result of his outspoken criticism of state politics and declared he was the "prisoner of (Tachira state governor) Ronald Blanco La Cruz." He claimed Blanco La Cruz had offered reward money to the prosecution and judge for arresting him. Azocar's arrest came one day after his March 5 accusations against Tachira state judge Jorege Ochoa Arrozaya. Azocar presented documents on his program which allegedly proved

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that Ochoa had never received a law degree in Colombia, as he claimed, and called for Ochoa's dismissal. Ochoa has issued rulings on a highly-charged political case against those accused of taking over the governor's mansion in April 2002. Tachira state media sources told emboffs March 8 that by attacking a judge involved on the case, Azocar had undermined the case's credibility, which could be seen as a personal attack on the governor since the case is closely tied to him. This theory seems to be supported by the prosecution's statement March 8, criticizing Azocar for using his program "to make serious accusations against (Ochoa)." Members of Venamcham's media commission told emboffs March 8 that the timing of the Azocar's detention, which came the day after he called for Ochoa's removal, indicated that the court's ruling was a political retaliation against Azocar by the governor.

COMMENT

15. (C) Azocar's lawyers and the media have called his arrest an attack on press freedom and linked it to the BRV's broader campaign against the opposition media. His case has certainly moved from Tachira onto the national stage) it was labeled an attack on press freedom by Reporters without Borders and the National Press Workers Union, and has received national media attention. However, while the BRV's assault on the press has created a permissive atmosphere for Azocar's arrest, his arrest does not appear directly linked to the BRV's broader initiative to muzzle the press by attacking key opposition media leaders. Azocar's arrest directly followed his call for the removal of a judge involved on a political case of personal importance to Tachira state's governor. His detention, while an assault on press freedom, appears to be more a political retaliation by the governor than the local extension of the BRV's anti-media campaign. It also reflects a chavista tendency to seek information regarding misdeeds of individuals and save them for use at a political optimum moment.
BROWNFIELD